

## The Church at Corinth

By [Edward Adams](#)

Thanks to the apostle Paul's extensive correspondence with the Corinthians, we are better informed about the church at Corinth than any other first-century church. In 1 Corinthians in particular, the apostle treats a wide range of issues affecting the community of believers, including divisiveness, litigation, food offered to idols, and class divisions at the communal meal. In so doing, he gives us an unparalleled, though hardly neutral, picture of the life of an early church.

The church at Corinth included some Jews ([1Cor 7:18-19](#)), but it was largely composed of [Gentile](#) converts ([1Cor 6:9-11](#), [1Cor 8:7](#), [1Cor 12:2](#)). Paul's statement in [1Cor 1:26](#) makes clear that the majority of church members were socially humble (some were slaves: see [1Cor 7:21-23](#)). Paul also implies that some members were wise, powerful, and even of noble birth ([1Cor 1:26](#)). The terms he uses had a fairly wide [socioeconomic](#) range and so do not necessarily point to the presence of the elite within the church, but they do indicate that a small number of congregants were somewhat more privileged than the others. Among this higher-status group was almost certainly Erastus, "the city treasurer," who sends greetings from Corinth in Paul's later letter to his community in Rome ([Rom 16:23](#)).

The social division signaled in [1Cor 1:26](#) may well have been a source of friction in the church. The division at the communal meal, which Paul describes in [1Cor 11:17-34](#), was probably a socioeconomic one, with poorer church members receiving a paltry amount of food, while the better-off gorged (see [1Cor 11:21](#), where "one goes hungry and another becomes drunk").

The Corinthian church was a mixed-gender group. [1Cor 11:2-16](#) reveals that women were fully involved in church life, participating vocally in gatherings for worship by praying (aloud) and prophesying. Paul does not in this passage attempt to curtail such involvement (though see [1Cor 14:34-35](#), a passage some think was added to the text at a later date) but insists that women should pray and [prophesy](#) with their heads covered.

It is difficult to know the size of the Corinthian church at the time of this first letter. Scholarly estimates range from 40 to 150 persons. It is often assumed that

when “the whole church” came together for worship ([1Cor 14:23](#)), it did so in a believer’s home, but Paul’s distinction between church and home in [1Cor 11:22](#) may suggest otherwise (compare [1Cor 11:34](#), [1Cor 14:34-35](#)). The meeting place may have been a rented dining hall, a large garden, or some other venue.

The church at Corinth clearly suffered from internal tensions. [1Cor 1-4](#) reflects the problem of factionalism, where Paul identifies separate parties that claim alternate allegiances to him, Apollos (a Jewish Christian preacher), Peter (one of Jesus’ disciples), or Christ (according to their own understanding, not Paul’s). These parties may represent splits within the church leadership. A particularly divisive issue was food offered to idols. Some believed that they had “liberty” to eat whatever and wherever they wanted, while others considered eating food that had been sacrificed to idols sinful and dangerous.

Despite conflicts within the group, the Christians at Corinth enjoyed friendly relations with outsiders. Believers dined with nonbelievers ([1Cor 10:27](#)), and outsiders might have dropped in to a Christian meeting ([1Cor 14:24-25](#)). Christianity at Corinth thus does not appear to have been particularly [sectarian](#) or subversive. Indeed, the church at Corinth was much too cozy with the dominant culture for Paul’s liking. By engaging in litigation, patronizing prostitutes, and participating in [pagan](#) cultic meals, the Corinthians were conforming to the behavior patterns of the larger society. In this first letter, Paul urges them to foster a sense of being at odds with the world.

Although Paul is [critical](#) of the Corinthians throughout much of the letter, their form of Christianity was successful: a large [congregation](#), lively worship, and secure and amicable relations with wider society.

Edward Adams, "Church at Corinth", n.p. [cited 1 Oct 2020].

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